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SUBJECT: QATAR FORGES ITS OWN "WAHABI" PATH

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael A. Ratney,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Qatar's brand of Islam, according to three sources, is both traditional and progressive. It is traditional in that it is based on scripture and standing interpretations, but progressive in its tolerance for various Islamic schools of thought and moderate social strictures. Even though Amirs of Qatar have referred to themselves and their subjects as "Wahabi," use of this term is increasingly pejorative in Qatar today. While most Qataris, if pressed, would identify themselves as Salafis, they generally do not label themselves as anything other than Muslims. The tone for the country, and its religion, emanates from the Amir. The current Amir several years ago made a point of using the Wahabi term as a descriptor in public, but his director of communications at the time believes he did so to make clear to Saudi Arabia that Qatar alone would dictate the terms of its religious practices and the vocabulary used to describe them. In comparison to its Saudi neighbors, Qatar has increasingly chosen to define its religious practices in progressive and inclusive terms. End Summary.

QATARIS: TOLERANT AND MODERATE MUSLIMS

12. (C) Frequent reference is made in the press and on the Internet to Qatar's brand of Islam as Wahabi, the prevailing current in Saudi Arabia. Yet Qatari society is starkly different from its Saudi neighbor. Qatari women in large numbers cover their faces and hair, but they are not required by law to do so. They are allowed to drive cars. Alcohol is available in hotels and at state liquor outlets, and even during Ramadan can be found in hotel minibars. Restaurants and stores remain open during the call to prayer. Women and men work alongside each other in the workplace. In short, Qatar looks anything but Wahabi when compared to Saudi Arabia. What should we make of the differences, and how do Qataris see themselves as Muslims?

13. (C) Imam Abdulsalem Basyoni of the Al-Fanar Islamic Center has lived and worked in Qatar for 19 years. Egyptian, he grew up in a Christian neighborhood of Cairo and works to build bridges between different religions and Muslims themselves. Basyoni told P/E Chief October 31 that Qataris see themselves first and foremost as Muslims. In his experience, they are also strongly moderate and are tolerant of their Muslim brothers and sisters whose Islamic school of thought may not be their own. Basyoni does not believe it is accurate to characterize Qataris in general as Wahabi in outlook.

14. (C) Majid Al-Ansari of the Al-Balagh Society, which operates Islam Online and two other Internet sites, BiblioIslam and Reading Islam, told P/E Chief October 28 that Westerners have a tendency to oversimplify the religious outlook of Muslims. Rather than describe Qataris as Wahabis, it is more accurate in his view to refer to the vast majority of them as Salafi in outlook. Members of this school of

Islamic thought, according to Al-Ansari, are generally traditional in thinking and understand Islam directly through the reading of scripture. He observed that although in Saudi Arabia imams who are very much a part of the government establishment describe themselves as Wahabi, most Qataris would describe themselves -- if pushed to categorize their brand of Islam -- as Salafi. Wahabi as a term, he said, is increasingly pejorative in Qatar and, thanks to Osama Bin Laden, carries today very negative connotations.

"ON THE PATH OF OUR AMIR"

¶5. (C) Al-Ansari said the more extreme Salafis in Qatar (like in Saudi Arabia) advocate a strong governmental role for the mosque. Their numbers, however, are small, and Al-Ansari underscored that "often the most extreme voices are non-Qatari." Some Qataris are becoming more "Americanized," or liberal in their Islamic views, though most remain "traditional but tolerant." In this sense, he would not currently describe the Qatari community as Salafi. That said, non-Qataris have often perceived Qatar as Salafi because Amir Abdullah bin Jasim Al Thani (the great-grandfather of the current Amir) pronounced himself to be one. The current Amir, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, in Al-Ansari's view, tries to maintain balance between Qatar's traditions and modernity. In this way, the Amir can ensure that Qatar is a friend of the U.S. without provoking the populace. The Amir, he said, is very careful to maintain historic architectural styles and traditional activities like camel racing even as Western-style advertising, Starbucks, and McDonald's have rapidly established themselves over the past five years.

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¶6. (C) The Qatari people are peaceful, observed Al-Ansari, who noted that in recent years two Amirs had been overthrown without bloodshed, much less vocal resistance. The current heir apparent, Sheikh Tamim, replaced his brother Jasim without an "article of explanation in the newspapers." No one raised a fuss. Salafis continue to have the most influence in mosques and religious affairs, but they by no means have a monopoly. Ultimately, he remarked, Qataris are traditional and, consistent with the Arab proverb, they "are on the path of their king." The current Amir (king) Hamad has tried to be practical in bringing about change, said Al-Ansari. The introduction of alcohol, for example, was seen as practical given the increasing presence of foreigners in Qatar. The government gradually and quietly allowed alcohol in five-star hotels and over time people grew accustomed to it, and its distribution expanded. Despite the large number of automobile accidents that can now be attributed to alcohol, according to Al-Ansari, the government has not sought to clamp down on its sale and distribution. Rather, it has kept quiet about the role that alcohol plays in traffic accidents. He said this conspiracy of silence, aimed at promoting tolerance, is the Qatari way.

SAUDI ARABIA WILL NOT DEFINE QATARI TERMS OF REFERENCE

¶7. (C) Small businessman (and until recently university professor of communications) Adel Al-Malki, in an October 29 conversation with P/E Chief, concurred with Al-Ansari on the important role the Amir plays in setting the national tone, especially on matters of religion. Al-Malki, who headed the information section in the Amiri Diwan from 1989-1999 under both the current Amir and his father, said there is much national pride among Qataris in Qatar's progress under the current Amir. Al-Malki echoed Al-Ansari's comment that "Wahabi" has a negative connotation for most Muslims these days and that the term "Salafi" is better suited to describing the religious tendencies of most Qataris. According to Al-Malki, it would be even more accurate to describe Saudis and Qataris as followers of the Hanbali

school of Islamic thought. He opined that the primary differences between Qatar and Saudi Arabia with respect to the practice of Islam are the different outlooks of the populations. According to Al-Malki, the Saudis are "bedouin traditionalists," whereas the Qataris are more modern and progressive. This progressivism, he stated, is reflected in Qatar's tolerance and accommodation of different religious currents in Islam. In contrast, the Saudis are beholden to upholding the Salafi tradition.

18. (C) In Qatar, according to Al-Malki, all schools of Islamic thought are represented. In this respect, he observed that Qataris are proud of being different from their Saudi neighbors. Al-Malki explained this difference in outlook was from Qatar's location on the Persian Gulf, which facilitated commerce and trade with foreigners vis-a-vis the land-locked deserts of Saudi Arabia. He said it is important to understand the rivalry on the progressive/traditional continuum between Saudi Arabia and Qatar to understand the context of the current Amir's statement some years ago (when Al-Malki was heading the information section of his office). The Amir publicly declared at the time: "I am Wahabi, and Qatar is a Wahabi country." Al-Malki said it was never clear why the Amir made the statement, but Al-Malki interpreted the statement as an effort by the Amir to put a modern face on the religious currents generally shared at the time between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. When the Amir made his statement, the Saudis were pressing Qatar to follow the Saudi lead in matters of religion. The Amir's statement, said Al-Malki, was most probably the Amir's way of saying, "Thank you very much, but we Qataris will do things our way."

19. (C) COMMENT: We believe there is much truth to Al-Malki's assertion that Wahabi references to Qatar need to be seen in the context of the Amir's reserving the right to carve out a progressive, modernist path for Qatar -- even when it veers from religious traditions long shared with Qatar's Saudi brethren of the Hanbali school. Judging by the extent to which Qataris seek to distance themselves from Saudi Arabia in all spheres, it should come as no surprise that even in religion Qataris define themselves by how they differ from their Saudi neighbors and yield to no one the right to define the terms or vocabulary by which Qataris live.

RATNEY